

Genesis 18:1-15

Abraham the Host

It is said that character is who you are when no one is watching. We all know that it is easy enough to do the right thing when we know we are being observed. But it is in the moments when we think we are alone that we tend to let down our guard and allow our standards to slip. Very few things can be as unnerving as discovering we were being observed when we didn't know it. A corollary of this can be found in the ways we treat other people. If we know that someone is important or influential, we are inclined to be more friendly and deferential. If we have no idea who someone is, or if we believe that a person is insignificant, we may be tempted to treat them less graciously.

In the passage we look at today, Abraham was minding his own business and trying to survive a hot day in the desert. No doubt he had much on his mind, and he was likely trying to take a break from the business of running a business. Surely he must have had his troubles - lack of water, sick animals, quarreling herdsmen. The triad of Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael must have caused Abraham no end of grief. Yet, when some strangers approached and interrupted his nap, Abraham responded admirably. Little did Abraham know, at that point, that he was practicing a maxim expounded by a later Christian author to "not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2).

God had made four appearances to Abraham over the period of twenty-four years. God had begun by calling Abram, as he was then named, to "go forth from your country," and God promised "I will bless you" (Genesis 12:1-2). Later, God reminded Abram that "I am a shield to you" and promised that "your reward will be very great" (Genesis 15:1). Finally God commanded Abraham to "walk before Me and be blameless," and God rewarded Abraham by stating He would "establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly" (Genesis 17:1-2).

But the promised reward of seed and land was slow to develop, at least according to Abraham's timetable. So, at first, Abraham presumed that a servant, Eliezer of Damascus would be his heir. Later, after God had told Abraham that the promised child would come from his own body and not be an adopted heir, Abraham and Sarah took it upon themselves to compel Sarah's maid Hagar to be the surrogate through whom the child would be conceived. Though the birth of Ishmael was a blessing to Abraham, the family strife that resulted was definitely not.

Now, again, God accompanied by two angels appeared to Abraham to state that Sarah would bear the promised child. And we see not only Abraham's graciousness as a host displayed, but are also reminded that "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

The Sudden Visitors

For the final time, Abraham is given a revelation concerning the birth of the long-promised child. "Now the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day" (v. 1). God and His angels had come to observe Sodom and Gomorrah and to give a message to Abraham. The fact that this is the only time in Scripture where God is joined by His angels when He

appears to a human adds to the uniqueness of the event. God's plan for the blessing of all nations through the seed of Abraham was about to commence. As they were on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, the visitors stopped by the place where Abraham resided. It was during the middle of the day, and Abraham was resting by his tent, taking in the shade from the cluster of trees at Mamre.

This particular setting has appeared in our narrative before. We can recall that after separating from Lot, Abraham journeyed to Mamre where he built an altar to the Lord (Genesis 13:18). The oaks at Mamre was also where Abraham was dwelling when he first heard the news of Lot's capture by the invading armies led by Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14:13). So this was a familiar habitation for Abraham, and he dwelt there often as he pastured his flocks throughout the land of Canaan.

We can picture Abraham half asleep, trying to catch a quick nap and be refreshed by whatever cool breeze might be wafting by. Roused from his rest, Abraham became aware of the visitors. "When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him" (v. 2). Their sudden appearance may have startled him, but other than that it seems there was nothing in their appearance to suggest that they were anything other than three weary travelers. Scripture gives no indication that Abraham knew who these people were at their first approach. Simply presuming they were simply people traveling to a particular destination Abraham responded graciously, for "when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth" (v. 2).

If I may be permitted a word about the beautiful literary style of this passage, it is worth noting that the narrator described what was happening in verse 1, and then shifted the focus to Abraham's perspective in verses 2-3. We see the name descriptive elements in the narrative about Moses' glowing face as he came down from the mountain after meeting with God (Exodus 34:29-35). Also, in the Job narrative, the reader knows why Job is suffering, even though he does not (Job 1). Such elegance and sophistication in the literary style of Scripture can often be overlooked, but it ought not to be discounted. The Bible is as delightful to read as it is profitable to study.

The visitors are not initially described in any way other than by calling them men (v. 2). It is in the rest of the passage, and in the following chapter, that Scripture makes it clear that these visitors are God and his angels. But that they are described here as mere men need not concern us for two reasons. First, the writer is giving us Abraham's perspective, and at this stage Abraham does not know that these men *are* God and His angels. Second, when assuming corporeal form in which to appear to humans, it is logical that God would choose human form.

The Sumptuous Host

Abraham greeted his visitors not only with the appropriate gestures (bowing himself before them), but he also offered more practical forms of attention. Rising from his bow, Abraham "said, 'my Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant'" (v. 3-5). Apparently one of the three was exceptional, since Abraham addressed him alone, and when he did so, Abraham used a term of respect.

The phrase “my Lord” was the ancient equivalent of our modern address of ‘sir’ and using it, as well as twice using the word ‘please’ was a sign of deference. Furthermore, the phrase “if now I have found favor in your sight” is especially used when trying to convey the sense of a subordinate speaking to one in authority. For example, when Jacob met his brother Esau after a long period of absence, he feared his brother was still resentful of the ways Jacob had cheated and tricked him out of both his birthright and their father Isaac’s blessing. Therefore, when he stood before Esau, Jacob said “please, if now I have found favor in your sight, then take my present from my hand, for I see your face as one sees the face of God, and you have received me favorably” (Genesis 33:10). Jacob was extending himself in every way possible to appear deferential and humble before his brother.

Abraham naturally presumed that his visitors would be tired, hungry, and thirsty, and he sought to serve them tangibly. Such hospitality was not uncommon in the culture, and Abraham had likely benefited from it himself from time to time during his sojourning in Canaan. In fact the absence of such civility would easily be interpreted as a sign of disrespect. Especially from someone as wealthy as Abraham had become, there was the social expectation of being a generous host. This social expectation included the host being responsible for his guests for as long as they remained with him. And a generous host was expected to care for his guests’ animals, see to it that the feet of his visitors were washed, provide a meal, and even provide overnight accommodations if necessary. We will see the same expectation practiced by Lot in a later narrative.

Abraham’s sumptuous offer was accepted. The three visitors responded simply “so do, as you have said” (v. 5). That Abraham then offered food to God, and perhaps more importantly, that God and his angels took that food and ate it (v. 8) has led some to discount this episode as mere mythology. It is difficult for some to imagine a God Who eats? And we should clarify that this description is quite different from other anthropomorphisms in Scripture that describe God as walking or seeing or hearing or having hands. This is an actual, literal depiction of God and His angels eating a meal.

Such a presentation of food sacrifices to the gods seems like an activity that would be more common to pagan worship. For example, ancient Mesopotamian texts have many stories of people presenting food to their gods in the hopes of conceiving a child, getting a wife back, or in appreciation for some gift already given by the gods. But these are not the same thing as what is presented here in Scripture. Abraham had no idea that the ‘men’ to whom he presented the meal were God and His angels. Neither is there any indication that Abraham was doing this either to convince the visitors to grant him a favor or in gratitude for their already having done so. Abraham was simply being a gracious host. And certainly we can see that by receiving the meal, God and His angels are not acting in any way contrary to their character, but rather making a concession to the human Abraham, who has graciously offered to serve them by bringing them something to eat.

So, upon hearing the news that his guests would receive his hospitality, Abraham put his household to work. “⁶Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, ‘quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.’ ⁷Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. ⁸He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them” (v. 6-8). The very vocabulary used by the writer emphasized

Abraham's urgency to be the good host. He 'hurried' and told his wife to 'quickly' prepare the meal and then he 'ran' to fetch the calf. All of this creates a scene of activity and eagerness to serve and bless the visitors. Abraham was not a reluctant host. He did not resent the interruption to his restful day. And neither was he half-hearted in his efforts. He did not try to skimp by with the minimum required to observe the social niceties. All the business of the day was put to a stop while he ordered his family and servants to work preparing for the visitors.

For example, the three measures of fine flour was excessive. One measure (a *seah*) was approximately eleven quarts of dry measure. This was surely abundance. Abigail had used five *seahs* of parched grain, along with a great deal of other food, to feed David and his men who were fleeing Saul (1 Samuel 25:18). The altar Elijah built on Mount Carmel had a trench around it that was large enough to hold twelve jars of water when filled. It was also described as be capable of holding two *seahs* of seed (1 Kings 18:32). Clearly, Sarah was preparing more bread than they would possibly be able to eat. Perhaps the intent was to have enough left over to provision the men on the next stage of their journey. Again, a sign of Abraham's generosity.

This same generosity characterized the rest of the meal. Side dishes like curds - think cottage cheese - and beverages, like milk, were offered. The main dish was, however, the calf, and this, too, was also a sign of extravagance. Usually the main meat eaten in the culture was goat. And this was true even on special occasions. For example, goat was what Isaac was hoping Esau would hunt and bring to him for one of his final meals (Genesis 27:9). When an angel of the Lord visited Gideon, he was offered "a young goat and unleavened bread" (Judges 6:19). Another judge, Manoah, did the same when he received an angelic visitor (Judges 13:15). So if a goat was adequate as a main course for a special guest, be they earthly or divine, Abraham's choice of a young calf can be seen as offering not just what was good, but what was best. One must immediately think of the rejoicing father who announced "bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²³for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:23-24).

Finally, we must note that Abraham acted as both host and waiter. Refraining from eating himself, he was "standing by them under the tree as they ate" (v. 8). No doubt he was eager to meet their every need, and though he had many servants, Abraham chose to honor these guests by serving them himself. We must also observe that Sarah, however, was not there. This may be because she was continuing to prepare other parts of the meal, or more likely because it was inappropriate for women to eat with men under such circumstances.

The Specific Promise

We can wonder at Abraham's surprise when his guests began the conversation by mentioning his wife, Sarah. "They said to him, 'where is Sarah your wife?'" (v. 9). These visitors not only knew Abraham was married, but even his wife's name. Perhaps it is possible that Abraham assumed that since he was a rich and powerful man in the region, these 'men' had simply heard of him as they wandered about looking for hospitality. We know, however, that the speaker was the Lord (v. 13).

When Abraham answered “there, in the tent” (v. 9), his guests continued “I will surely return to you at this time next year; and behold, Sarah your wife will have a son” (v. 10). While the content of the announcement was not news to Abraham, it being shared by these three men must have alerted Abraham to the fact that his visitors were not the simple wanderers he had believed. Scripture does not say how much time had elapsed between the previous visit by God and this encounter, but it must have been soon after. Abraham was ninety-nine when God confirmed that Sarah would bear the child who would be called Isaac (Genesis 17:19). Then the timing of the birth was stated in the terms “this season next year” (Genesis 17:21) suggesting the birth was approximately twelve months away. Now the Lord stated “at this time next year” (v. 10), essentially the same thing.

At this point, Abraham must have assumed that his guests were divine. The long-promised child, mentioned first twenty-four years ago, was again proclaimed to be coming. We know that Abraham had been told this before. God had often promised Abraham an heir. And God had further promised that the child would come from Abraham’s own body. Finally, God had also assured Abraham that Sarah would bear that child. Now Abraham was reminded *when* that child would arrive.

We are not told what Abraham thought or felt at this revelation. Earlier, he had focused on his old age, or the fact that Sarah had been barren for so long. He had offered compromise candidates such as Eliezer of Damascus and Hagar’s child Ishmael. But here it is only the narrator’s perspective that we see. Ignoring Abraham for the moment, the author informs us that “Sarah was listening at the tent door, which was behind him” (v. 10), and the writer reminds us yet again that “Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; Sarah was past childbearing” (v. 11).

It is not possible to miss the emphasis here. Repetition is used to draw attention to the impossibility of Abraham and Sarah having a child. The couple were pronounced as ‘old’ and, as if that were not specific enough, it is repeated that they were also “advanced in age.” That latter phrase was usually used in Scripture to describe a patriarchs final days (Genesis 24:1; Joshua 13:1). Finally, specifically Sarah was mentioned as being “past childbearing.” This last phrase is most significant. It meant that Sarah had passed through the stage of menopause. She was not merely old, she had ceased to be physically capable (in human terms) of bearing a child.

So certain was Sarah that childbearing was impossible that, as she was eavesdropping on the conversation, “Sarah laughed to herself, saying, ‘after I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?’” (v. 12). The fact that she mentioned ‘pleasure’ indicated that she and Abraham had likely stopped having sexual intercourse entirely due to Sarah’s time of life. They had Ishmael, and though Sarah regretted her decision to allow Abraham to father a child through her servant, nevertheless the boy had reached the age at which he was likely to survive into adulthood and inherit the family’s property and position. The promised heir had been born and was becoming an adult. Furthermore, that the problem of producing a child did not lie with Abraham was proven in the birth of Ishmael, and would later be seen with other children born to Abraham after Sarah died through Abraham’s second wife, Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). In her defense, Sarah at least does not fall on her face laughing, as did Abraham when he was told that Ishmael was not to be the heir, but rather another child that Sarah would bear (Genesis 17:17). In fact hers seems to be more of a quiet rolling of the eyes and muffled chuckle.

But as Sarah had overheard the conversation during the meal, now she herself was overheard. As if to draw particular attention to the credibility of the One making the promise, “¹³the Lord said to Abraham, ‘why did Sarah laugh, saying, “shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?” ¹⁴Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son” (v. 13-14). It is only now that the visitor clearly identifies Himself as the Lord, Yahweh. Just as He knows when the child will be born, He also knew that Sarah had laughed. He did not hear her, and He did not see her face. God simply knew. But we must also notice also that God did not speak directly to Sarah, His comments were made to Abraham. Sarah was the subject of the conversation, not a participant in it.

The word translated ‘difficult’ means wonderful or extraordinary. As Jeremiah used the term, “Ah Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You” (Jeremiah 32:17). The point God was making was that He was not limited by the human understanding of things. It *was* impossible, humanly speaking, for Abraham and Sarah to conceive a child. But it was not impossible for God. We must never forget that God told us, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8).

But we can wonder why God rebuked Sarah for doubting His ability to produce a child, when He did not do so to Abraham? Though there is no biblical record of their conversation, we must believe that Abraham had already told Sarah of the revelations God had made to Him. Surely the two of them had talked about Sarah conceiving a child, even if it was impossible to believe it to be true. So God’s frustration with Sarah was that she *continued* in her unbelief despite now overhearing from God, Himself, that she would bear a child. In other words, Sarah had not believed Abraham, and now she doubted the words of her divine visitors. That was why God called Sarah to account. And God also reminded Sarah of His power. “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” (v.14), He asked rhetorically. To this neither Abraham nor Sarah attempted an answer. Let us note also, that Sarah’s lack of belief does not impact the plan of God. Sarah *would* conceive a son, and she *would* give birth at the proper time.

When she heard God speak, Sarah became afraid. She knew she had been found out, and though she tried to deny it, she had been discovered. And God would not pretend to ignore her lack of faith. “Sarah denied it however, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid” (v. 15). We can appreciate Sarah’s fear. Adam’s fear of God caused him to hide in the garden. Abraham’s fear of the Egyptians prompted him to sacrifice the honor and safety of his wife to protect himself. Now Sarah feared she had angered the divine guest Who sat at table with her husband. So she committed a second sin to try to cover up the first. Finally, God now spoke to Sarah. “He said, ‘no, but you did laugh” (v. 15). He did not dismiss her sin, nor did He further chastise her for it. He simply acknowledged that He knew her heart and left it at that.

Takeaways

Let us never underestimate the power of our God. Our perspective is so limited. It is limited by time and space, but it is also limited by our sin. We do not see clearly. We cannot possibly see things as God sees them. So in both times of blessings and times of trial let us remember that “nothing is too difficult for the Lord.”